Crossing: The INPR Journal

Vol. II (2021): 57-71

DOI: [10.21428/8766eb43.d36fo876](https://doi.org/10.21428/8766eb43.d36fo876)

Mikel Dufrenne's "Pour une philosophie non théologique" and his Relevance for Theological Phenomenology

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Theologians and philosophers of religion have betrayed a relative disinterest in the thought of Mikel Dufrenne (1910–1995),¹ and even those articles, dissertations, and other cursory references to Dufrenne's thought within the theological literature of the last twenty years have as a rule seemingly confined themselves to his early *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*.² Among those who may be said to belong to the "theological turn" in French phenomenology, for whom the lack of available English translations of Dufrenne's later works is of no consequence, only Paul Ricœur and Michel Henry (to my knowledge) mention Dufrenne in their works.³ To be fair,

¹ Dufrenne has more recently captured the attention of some within philosophical circles. See Frédéric Jacquet, *Naître au Monde: Essai sur la Philosophie de Mikel Dufrenne* (Paris: Éditions Mimésis, 2014); Jean-Baptiste Dussert and Adnen Jdey, eds., *Mikel Dufrenne et l'Esthétique: Entre Phénoménologie et Philosophie de la Nature* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2016); and Maryvonne Saison, *La Nature Artiste: Mikel Dufrenne de l'Esthétique au Politique* (Paris: Éditions de la Sorbonne, 2018). Notably, Marcelle Brisson[-Dufrenne] employs Dufrenne's thought in her early study in philosophy of religion, *Expérience Religieuse et Expérience Esthétique* (Montreal, Canada: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 1974).

² See, for example, Mark Wynn, "Representing the gods: the role of art and feeling," *Religious Studies* 36 (2000): 315–31; Brett David Potter, "Broken Open by Beauty: Art and Metaphysics in the Theological Aesthetics of Hans Urs von Balthasar," PhD diss. (University of St. Michael's College, 2016); David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003), 14; and Bruce V. Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 132 and 141.

³ See Michel Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, trans. Girard Etzkorn (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), 71, 375, 412, and 415; and Paul Ricœur, "La notion d'*a priori* selon Mikel Dufrenne (1961)" and "Le Poétique (1966)," in *Lectures 2: La Contrée des Philosophes* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1990), 325–34 and 335–47, respectively.

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the title of Dufrenne's essay "Pour une philosophie non théologique" certainly does not recommend its author's works to those interested in pursuing questions in theological phenomenology. Indeed Dominique Janicaud cites Dufrenne's essay as in effect anticipating his own minimalist phenomenological project through an elaboration of a non-theological philosophy:

These analyses [in Dufrenne's "Pour une philosophie non théologique"] appear confirmed and continued by the work carried out in *The 'Theological Turn,'* aiming at criticizing certain contemporary French phenomenologists for their methodological displacements or even methodological drifting in favor of Transcendence, an Arch-Original, or of Givenness, which are phenomenological in name only.⁴

That said, the decidedly non-theological thrust of Dufrenne's thought should not preclude serious consideration of his text or of his project as a whole by theological phenomenology.

Following a presentation of the general contours of Dufrenne's argumentation in "Pour une philosophie non théologique," particularly with respect to his critiques of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot, I argue that his non-theological philosophy of presence may be retrieved constructively by theological phenomenology, both because his critique of what I call crypto-theological philosophers of absence leaves intact the God of classical Christianity and because his phenomenological framework offers an integral picture of the human person's natural condition that is not incompatible with Christian theological phenomenology. I then identify certain points at which Dufrenne's framework surpasses that of Michel Henry with respect to incarnate existence in the cosmos and argue that, when theologically retrieved, Dufrenne's framework may be deployed in the development of a new philosophy of Christianity modeled on Henry's.

For a Non-Theological Philosophy

Published in 1973 as a preface of sorts to the second edition of his *Le Poétique* (first published in 1963), Dufrenne's "Pour une philosophie non théologique" proceeds in two gestures, the first critical and the second apologetic.⁵ The first part of the text

⁴ Dominique Janicaud, *Phenomenology 'Wide Open': After the French Debate*, trans. Charles N. Cabral (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 14.

⁵ Mikel Dufrenne, "Pour une philosophie non théologique," in *Le Poétique, Précédé de Pour une Philosophie non Théologique*, 2 ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1973), 7–57. Henceforth cited as PPNT. Maryvonne Saison summarizes Dufrenne's argumentation similarly in her *La Nature Artiste* (135 f.), and in some cases we have cited the same passages. My selection of these passages was

involves an extended critique of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot (and to a lesser extent their precursor Martin Heidegger) as philosophers of absence who operate in what may be called a crypto-theological mode.⁶ Both philosophers, Dufrenne suggests, share the common heresy of what in one instance he describes as “ontologizing lack, of theologizing absence,” in a manner analogous to what he understands as the tradition of negative theology’s identification of an *a priori* absolute or God as the positive ground of all things that is at the same time beyond reach, situated at a seemingly insuperable distance and characterized by an absolute transcendence.⁷ Such a transcendent absolute for negative theology, experienced in a “‘vision’ . . . which dislocates the subject,” can be approached—that is, made present—only by way of negation.⁸ Absence here takes precedence at the expense of concrete presence. As Dufrenne goes on to argue at length, both Derrida and Blanchot repeat these gestures in their own way by positing an aboriginal absence and by describing the subject’s fundamentally alienating experience in the face of it, both of which obfuscate the human person’s concrete presence to the sensuous world or cosmos.

A significant portion of Dufrenne’s critique of Derrida focuses on the latter’s notions of *différance* and the trace, which in Dufrenne’s view are symptomatic of an absolutization and radicalization of absence over presence.⁹ In an effort to think outside the closure of language or meaning, outside of a metaphysics of presence, Derrida turns to *différance* and its movement of deferral in order to establish the

independent of her text, which was consulted after my own reading of Dufrenne’s text, and my attention was drawn to them precisely for their centrality to Dufrenne’s argumentation and their relevance to theological phenomenology.

⁶ Only the first few paragraphs of Dufrenne’s essay constitute a direct engagement with Heidegger’s thought and serve to set the stage for his lengthier discussions of Derrida and Blanchot. In brief, Dufrenne wonders whether the ontological difference identified by Heidegger does not arise from “a theological inspiration,” inasmuch as Heidegger is led to posit a Being that, however incommensurable with beings and however much it itself does nothing, nonetheless “always has the initiative” in founding history and the world, but without producing them—“perhaps one could say: makes [them] appear.” PPNT, 8. All translations are original unless otherwise noted.

⁷ PPNT, 35n2. Although in its immediate context this passage is directed at philosophies of suspicion that fixate on the enigma, and more precisely at a certain psychoanalytic mode of thought that, for example, “conceives of desire as an earthquake without epicenter, as a great wind that blows from nowhere,” its succinct formulation is consistent with Dufrenne’s readings of Derrida and Blanchot in the main text. *Ibid.*

⁸ PPNT, 28. Among the thinkers that Dufrenne associates with this negative theological tradition are the Plato of *Parmenides* and Neo-Platonists more broadly (e.g., Plotinus, Proclus, Damascius), Dionysius, the Fathers of the Church, gnostics, and hermetics. PPNT, 21.

⁹ Dufrenne’s critique of Derrida keeps largely to *De la Grammatologie* (1967), *L’Écriture et la Différence* (1967), and “La ‘différance’” (1968).

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absence of a ground of linguistic meaning.¹⁰ However, this amounts to an ontologization of absence, in Dufrenne's estimation, and leads Derrida to account for the advent of meaning (i.e., presence) by resorting to what I call crypto-theological gestures that implicate him in an onto-theological paradigm.¹¹ The trace of *différance* is in a sense productive of linguistic difference; in this way it becomes a "sort of pre-God, not the negation of God, but a God in the negative" that produces the space of differences for the advent of meaning.¹² By conflating the logical with the ontological and by elevating *différance* into an absolute transcendent principle, Derrida has confronted subjects with an alienating experience of absence in the deferral of meaning that ultimately relegates them to the role of a mere "servants or . . . playthings" of language in a system of meaning production.¹³ But, Dufrenne avers, perhaps there is a way to account for the advent (that is, the presence) of meaning without resorting to some transcendent principle; perhaps meaning emerges from the sensuous presence of the thing itself prior to its instauration in a system of signifiers. Indeed, perhaps "the signifier contains the signified in the immanence of the sensuous [*du sensible*], as poetry suggests."¹⁴ The "ontology of

¹⁰ PPNT, 14.

¹¹ PPNT, 21.

¹² PPNT, 20. See also PPNT, 16–17, 19 ff. Dufrenne would likely argue similarly with respect to Derrida's notion of *khōra*, which does not seem to appear in the text under consideration. *Khōra* too is the product of a thought that inordinately elevates negativity and absence as, if not a God (because not giving), then as some Wholly Other removed from the concrete experience of the human person. As John Caputo acknowledges in speaking of the irreducible otherness of *khōra*, even though "this *tout autre* does not go under the name of God, is not an event or promise or gift, and has nothing to do with negative theology," he nevertheless suggests that "its very barrenness obliges us to speak of it as if it were the Wholly Other that theology calls God, the very same." John Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 37. Does this not beg the question of Derrida's crypto-theological inclinations?

¹³ PPNT, 15. See also PPNT, 17. This is analogous to Dufrenne's critique of Heidegger in *The Notion of the A Priori*, originally published in 1959, where he had already accused the latter of a certain theological tendency: "This theme [of the finitude of the human person] possesses undeniable theological echoes . . . because a) this finitude is the fact of Being in man, b) Being as transcendence achieves in man the act of transcending, and c) man with his future is only the instrument or the witness of an adventure of Being." Mikel Dufrenne, *The Notion of the A Priori*, trans., Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966), 28.

¹⁴ PPNT, 13. This quotation gives a taste of the phenomenology of poetry that Dufrenne develops in *Le Poétique*. At issue, ultimately, is the synesthetic perception of meaning given in sensuous presence that lies at the origin of poetic and aesthetic expression. See also Mikel Dufrenne, *L'Œil et l'Oreille* (Montreal, Canada: L'Hexagone, 1987) and idem, "The A Priori of Imagination," trans. Mark S. Roberts, in *In the Presence of the Sensuous*, ed. Mark S. Roberts and Dennis Gallagher (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1987), 27–37. Maurice Pradines' thought on sensation and perception, Gaston Bachelard's on the imagination, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's on

presence” to which such a phenomenology of poetry gives rise, Dufrenne insists, would avoid the onto-theological missteps that cause Derrida himself to stumble.¹⁵ Even when Derrida focuses on the subject’s concrete experience of being in the world (e.g., the limit experiences of creators such as Artaud, or the quotidian experience of the *phoné*), Dufrenne goes on to argue, the fundamental experience described remains that of alienation. It is a matter of an experience of “not belonging to oneself . . . [or] to the race of men,” an experience of having “no origin, no foundation,” that “pulls thought back into the environs of Transcendence” so as to become effectively a non-thought.¹⁶ So it is, Dufrenne concludes, that we recognize “in filigree in the philosophy of Derrida” that dislocating vision of negative theology described above, here understood as “an experience of absence—the very experience of nihilism—itself tending towards a presence which would supply at once a confirmation and a denial [*démenti*].”¹⁷ This experience comes at the expense of presence, or more precisely, of the human person’s presence to sense given in sensuous presence.

Dufrenne locates a similar crypto-theological absolutization of absence in Maurice Blanchot’s descriptions of the experience of dying and of the Neuter, for example.¹⁸ In both cases, for Dufrenne, there is an experience of alienation analogous to the dislocating vision of negative theology as the subject is confronted with the impossibility of meaning.¹⁹ No matter the name Blanchot gives to this non-sense, it “always proceeds from the same experience of exile: the impossibility of a relation, of a contact, of a foundation.”²⁰ And yet one encounters in Blanchot’s texts, Dufrenne maintains, an experience that bears a certain resemblance to that of the sacred in its ambivalence, for, though Blanchot absolutizes the negative or absence, he nevertheless describes a desire for an elsewhere or a hope for presence in face of the Outside that repeats theology’s pining for another world.²¹ Thus, according to Dufrenne’s critique, both Blanchot and Derrida absolutize absence as a transcendent

expression are all significant influences upon the development of Dufrenne’s thought here and in *Le Poétique*.

¹⁵ PPNT, 14.

¹⁶ PPNT, 27.

¹⁷ PPNT, 27–28.

¹⁸ Dufrenne’s analysis centers on Blanchot’s 1969 text *L’Entretien Infini*.

¹⁹ PPNT, 28.

²⁰ PPNT, 32.

²¹ PPNT, 35–36. See also PPNT, 25. It is worth noting that Rudolph Otto’s *The Idea of the Holy* (in its French translation, *Le Sacré*) plays a significant role in Dufrenne’s understanding of the sacred in “Pour une philosophie non théologique” and elsewhere. See Rudolph Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey, 2d ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), and idem, *Le Sacré*, trans. André Jundt (Paris: Éditions Payot, 2015).

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ground, but only by way of operating certain crypto-theological gestures analogous to those found in the tradition of negative theology as he understands it.²²

Dufrenne's motivation in his critique of Derrida and Blanchot, or at least one of his motivations, is upholding the human person's freedom for self-realization and their concrete place in and engagement with reality.²³ Practically the same critique that he directs at Derrida's and Blanchot's absolutization of the negative is directed at those who follow a similar, although more explicitly theological path that absolutizes a transcendent presence. Take Baruch Spinoza's *Deus, sive Natura* as an example. According to the Dutch philosopher, Dufrenne writes,

Man [*L'homme*] realizes his nature in becoming integrated into Nature, or rather in understanding that he is integrated with it. . . . Yet, must one absorb time in eternity? This is to give a theological turn to the idea of Nature and to forbid man from ever being able to bring anything . . . to Nature: the die is cast, consciousness of the true adds nothing to the true, Being does not await appearing; God has no need of man, and at the same time man can do nothing but be what he is.²⁴

It is the human person's concrete, contributory, and dynamic relation to the truth or meaning encountered variously—although always in the presence of the sensuous world or cosmos—that drives Dufrenne's philosophical vision. In order to grasp the human person's original relation to meaning one need not have recourse to some transcendent absolute ("just as one can think the other without seeing there the face of the Wholly Other").²⁵ One need only return to presence. The remainder of "Pour une philosophie non théologique" explicates this alternative path in the development of a non-theological philosophy of presence.

To the loss of the subject effected by negative theologies and crypto-theological philosophies of absence or the negative, Dufrenne responds with the

²² PPNT, 38.

²³ The following passage nicely summarizes Dufrenne's humanistic concerns, which find expression variously throughout his writings: "Philosophy does not therefore require that man be bracketed or placed at the service of some transcendent authority, for example by philosophy itself. To the contrary, philosophy remains meaningful [*garde son sens*] only if it is the discourse of a man who addresses himself to men and speaks to them of the world and of man. But it is not only the fate of philosophy that is at stake today; it is at the same time the fate of man, as he is confronted with the system or with the concept." Mikel Dufrenne, *Pour l'Homme* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1968), 122–23.

²⁴ Dufrenne, *Le Poétique*, 221. For Dufrenne's early essays on Spinoza, who plays a notable role in his later conception of aesthetic experience, see Mikel Dufrenne, "Dieu et l'homme dans la philosophie de Spinoza" and "La connaissance de Dieu dans la philosophie spinoziste" in *Jalons* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966), 28–69 and 112–26, respectively.

²⁵ PPNT, 14.

positive, perceptual experience of the subject given in its presence to the sensuous. In return, he regains the subject and its concrete situation in the sensuous world or the cosmos, and from there develops a phenomenological ontology and cosmology. In his words, a philosophy of presence “seeks the impetus [*le resort*] for ontology in a phenomenology, and particularly in a phenomenology of perception.”²⁶ For it is precisely the experience of perception and its analysis, he goes on to write later, that “can deliver the being-in-the-world from the terror or vertigo that give rise to the thought of a backworld: a truly [*proprement*] originary experience of presence, which puts man in the world as in truth.”²⁷ There is no need in this non-theological philosophy to account for the origin of presence by having recourse to a transcendent absolute beyond what is given in sensuous presence. A non-theological philosophy of presence, he writes, “would know that presence is given *hic et nunc*. It is the gift itself, which involves no giver, [and] which is only the unforeseeable and prodigal becoming of the real. No absolute origin on the frontiers of nothingness, but only the originary: the power of Nature.”²⁸ Without drawing too close of an association, one thinks of Jean-Luc Marion’s reduction to givenness articulated in terms of the gift, where bracketing the giver leaves one with “the lived experiences immanent to the consciousness of the givee.”²⁹ By attempting to bracket any and all transcendent givers or absolute foundations, theological or crypto-theological, Dufrenne similarly seeks to arrive at the experience immanent to consciousness (or more precisely for him, subjectivity) as delivered through perception. Whereas with such an approach Marion sees an opening within phenomenology for the possibility of God, Dufrenne sees a path for the development of a truly non-theological philosophy of presence.

This path in a return to the subject’s concrete presence to the sensuous world or cosmos leads Dufrenne to elaborate a cosmology. Cosmological gestures appear variously throughout his writings, from his commanding analyses of aesthetic experience in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* and in the final part of *The Notion of the A Priori*, to his later texts, *L’Inventaire*, *L’Œil et l’Oreille*, and select essays in *La Vie, l’Amour, la Terre*. Nonetheless, *Le Poétique*, which “Pour une philosophie non théologique” appends, remains the most extensive treatment of cosmological themes among his works. In order to develop the cosmological

²⁶ PPNT, 39. Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception is key here, although Dufrenne advances beyond Merleau-Ponty in the development of what he later calls a “phenomenology of the virtual [that] would be identified with an ontology of the flesh.” Dufrenne, *L’Œil et l’Oreille*, 200.

²⁷ PPNT, 39. It is worth noting Dufrenne’s later qualification: “We do not claim that presence is full, we say only that it is first or primary [*première*], that at each instant it holds the secret—a secret to knowledge [*le savoir*] alone—of the origin.” PPNT, 45–46.

²⁸ PPNT, 56. See also PPNT, 20 f.

²⁹ Jean-Luc Marion, *Being Given: Toward a Phenomenology of Givenness*, trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 102.

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implications of his phenomenological framework, Dufrenne proceeds beyond the recognition of the subject's connaturality with the sensuous delivered in perception (and especially in aesthetic perception) to consider the ground prior to the emergence of the subject—that is, the originary ground anterior to the differentiation between subject and object, anterior to the emergence of the intentional correlation, anterior to language and to culture. This ground is experienced by the subject in moments of wild perception (*perception sauvage*) that signal a return of the subject to presence, or what at times Dufrenne refers to as the subject's re-birth to presence, this "return to the environs of the origin, there where the individual feels he is in the world . . . , there where he is reborn [*renâit*] to himself without being separated from the world and without risking alienation."³⁰ Come Dufrenne's explicit cosmological turn in *Le Poétique*, this originary ground is

³⁰ Mikel Dufrenne, "L'art et le sauvage," in *Esthétique et Philosophie*, vol. 2 (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1976), 335. Dufrenne speaks of wild perception in this essay's sister text, "Vers l'originaire . . . ," on *Esthétique et Philosophie*, 97, and elsewhere. It is of critical importance for a proper understanding of Dufrenne's thought to note that this return to what is anterior to the subject's separation from the originary or, in more concrete terms, prior to cultural sedimentation, does not imply some (in reality impossible) divestment of one's culture before the phenomenon. As he writes in *L'Inventaire*, "one must have a lot of culture to be delivered from culture, and perhaps one cannot be delivered from it for a moment except after having exploited its resources. This is especially the case when the object bids one [*invite*] have recourse to it. Take tonal music, for example: one hears it better, one enjoys it better when the analysis to which its composition invites [*convie*] us has freed it from the muddle of sounds which presents itself at the first hearing." Mikel Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire des A Priori: Recherche de l'Originaire* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1981), 297. What is fundamentally at issue here is the continued and contributory role that representation ("culture") plays in the perceptual act on the basis of the real immanence of presence to representation that Dufrenne affirms. That this same example of the subject's improved hearing of a piece of music through representation (or culture) also appears in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* and in *The Notion of A Priori* attests to the importance of this point to understanding Dufrenne's thought. See Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, trans. Edward S. Casey (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 389 and 418, as well as idem, *The Notion of the A Priori*, 102. I would submit that the capacity for Dufrenne's thought to exceed the limitations of Michel Henry's and Jean-Luc Marion's phenomenological frameworks ultimately derives from his analysis of musical experience and what it discloses about the role of representation in perception. Henry's and Marion's frameworks are incapable of adequately accounting for the complexities of this experience, and their preference for abstract expressionist painting (Kandinsky and Rothko, Courbet notwithstanding) is a symptom of this structural inadequacy. Their occasional references to music in their works leave one wanting, and in no way match the sophistication of Dufrenne's analysis of musical experience in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*. In addition to those passages cited above, see Dufrenne, "The Musical Work," in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 249–73; Henry, "Music and painting," in *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 111–18; Marion, *Being Given*, 216 and 350n6; and Marion, "The Banality of Saturation," trans. Jeffrey L. Kosky, in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina Gschwandtner and others (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 119–44.

identified with Nature, and through a retrieval of the thought of F. W. J. Schelling he elaborates a temporal conception of this ground as the hearth of possibilities, including the possibility of the emergence of a singular subject through whom it may appear. Indeed, Dufrenne goes so far as to say that, in a sense, Nature desires its appearing in the emergence of the subject.³¹ Although the subject's emergence brings about its separation and alienation from the originary through the event of empirical birth and through the advent of conscious representation, Dufrenne insists repeatedly that this "separation will never be total: consciousness will never renounce perceptive faith."³² The subject always remains in the presence of the sensuous. Thus, moments of re-birth through wild perception are always available to the Dufrennian subject, whether they arise in the experience of an aesthetic (or poetic) object, in the orgasm, in the fête, or in the riot.³³

The Basis for a Theological Retrieval

Nothing from the preceding analysis renders Mikel Dufrenne's framework incompatible with a constructive theological phenomenological retrieval of his thought. This is so for two reasons. First, Dufrenne himself is at least tentatively open to the possibility that his thought might bear upon theological questions. As he notes in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience* during a discussion of the ontological significance of aesthetic experience, "We cannot take up here the question of whether ontology excludes or presupposes theology."³⁴ This is admittedly a relatively minor admission, and one that is drowned out at other times in his later writings by a noticeable (although not necessarily unfounded) animosity towards "the Church" as a dogmatic institution.

The second and more compelling reason theological phenomenology may retrieve Dufrenne's framework is that the God he presupposes in his critique of negative theology and which therefore determines his critique of crypto-theological philosophies is not the God of classical Christianity. It is a God of metaphysics. The God that he rejects is "a sovereign power, the clockmaker of the great clock, the Providence from which no one escapes," or the "Wholly Other" that, as Dufrenne

³¹ PPNT, 46 ff. See Book Three, "Le Poétique dans la Nature," in *Le Poétique*, as well as Adnen Jdey, "Individuation, expression et *a priori*: Le statut de la *Naturphilosophie* dans l'esthétique de Mikel Dufrenne," in *Mikel Dufrenne et l'Esthétique*, 79–99. Both Renaud Barbaras and Frédéric Jacquet have voiced concerns over this teleological schema. See Renaud Barbaras, *Dynamique de la Manifestation* (Paris: Librairie philosophique J. Vrin, 2013) and Jacquet's *Naître au Monde*.

³² Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire*, 277.

³³ PPNT, 48.

³⁴ Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 547n4.

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describes it, abides at a distance from the world that only a creative act can traverse.³⁵ Dufrenne's reduction to presence brackets this metaphysical God in order to understand the human person's original relation to the sensuous world free of a transcendent principle that would supposedly ground existence from a distance, in absence—but it does not bear upon the God of Christianity properly understood. Theological phenomenology may thus consider Dufrenne's analyses simply for what they offer: sophisticated accounts of the subject's natural condition or incarnate existence in the cosmos, from which one may then consider the incarnate subject in its relation to the God of Christianity confessed to have been revealed in the person of Christ, but also, in the vein of natural theology, in and through the cosmos itself.

Incidentally, Jean-Luc Marion's own approach to theological phenomenology legitimizes such a retrieval of Dufrenne's thought. In much the same way as Marion retrieves Husserl's and Heidegger's respective phenomenological frameworks in order to expand the borders of the discipline by going beyond their naïve, metaphysical conceptions of God's transcendence, so we can retrieve Dufrenne's thought and utilize it constructively in spite of his mistaken understanding of the Christian God.³⁶ As Marion writes in *Being Given*:

[T]he bracketed 'God' . . . defined only as the ground (*Grund*) of the facticity of the world, therefore according to its metaphysical sense as a transcendent being outside the world . . . leave[s] intact any definition of God not based on a transcendence of this (metaphysical) type. Now, it is precisely the case for revealed theology that it approaches God by immanence as well as by transcendence.³⁷

Dufrenne's misconception of the Christian God in his articulation of a non-theological philosophy of presence does not bear upon the Christian God classically conceived, which remains intact. We are left, then, with his phenomenological analyses of incarnate existence, which may be retrieved precisely to the degree to which they illuminate the depths of human lived experience.

The proposal here is a modest one, and the procedure admittedly could be repeated with other non-theological philosophers. What, then, makes Dufrenne specifically worth further consideration for theological phenomenology? First, his

³⁵ Dufrenne, *Le Poétique*, 206–7. Although this passage originates in *Le Poétique* proper, it is consistent with Dufrenne's critique of the God of negative theology described in "Pour une philosophie non théologique." See PPNT, 21–22.

³⁶ See Jean-Luc Marion's 1992 essay "The Possible and Revelation," in *The Visible and the Revealed*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 7, as well as his more impatient response to Janicaud in *Being Given*, §7.

³⁷ Marion, *Being Given*, 343n4.

dual notion of the *a priori* as both subjective and objective clears a path within phenomenology between the twin excesses of subjective idealism on the one hand, which perennially threatens the discipline's objectivity, and of gross materialism on the other, which threatens the integrity of the human person's subjectivity.³⁸ In much the same way, Dufrenne's framework provides theological phenomenology a middle way between the hyper-subjectivism of Michel Henry, whose framework excludes transcendence and exteriority from the domain of phenomenological effectivity in favor of the radical because non-intentional immanence of life at the expense of the subject's concreteness,³⁹ and the hyper-objectivism of Jean-Luc Marion, whose emphasis upon absolute givenness and saturated phenomenality comes at the expense of the subject⁴⁰ and its real contribution to the phenomenalization of the given.⁴¹ Dufrenne's framework provides this middle way by offering a theory of perception that inextricably roots the human person to the sensuous. Theological phenomenology requires such a theory of perception if it is to offer a complete picture of the human person's relation to others, to the cosmos, and

³⁸ For Dufrenne's articulation of the objective *a priori* as that which structures or constitutes the object as meaningful, and the subjective *a priori* as the subject's corresponding virtual knowledge of the objective *a priori* without which the latter would not appear, see *The Notion of the A Priori*, in which the author elaborates upon certain conclusions reached in *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*.

³⁹ Since more will be said about Henry below, the following will suffice to justify this designation of his framework as hyper-subjectivist. He defines life thusly: "[I]t carries no divide or gap within it and never differs from itself. . . . [L]ife, on the contrary, keeps within it that which it reveals, it resides inside, in ever living being. . . . Foreign to the world, acosmic, invisible, the relation of life to living being is a relation of absolute immanence." Michel Henry, "Phenomenology of Life," trans. Nick Hanlon, *Angelaki* 8, no. 2 (August 2003): 103–4.

⁴⁰ Two representative passages will suffice. In *Being Given*, for example, one finds the subject referred to as "a mere screen for lived experiences." Marion, *Being Given*, 175. And in Marion's book on Courbet, one finds descriptions of the artist as a paradigmatic gifted subject who operates the "effacement of the *ego* before the in-itself of what appears, in order to allow it precisely to appear." Marion, *Courbet, ou la Peinture à l'Œil* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014), 202. This issues in nothing short of what Marion calls the "elimination of man," which, in an allusion to the work of Czech phenomenologist Jan Patočka, he then describes (with questionable success) as an "*epoché* without reduction." Ibid., 201. The objection that this text is no more than an occasional work compared to Marion's more frequent allusions to Mark Rothko is immaterial. The phenomenological framework undergirding his analysis of the painter of Ornans is the same as that which determines his selection of Rothko in support of his description of phenomenological saturation according to quality.

⁴¹ "Nothing of what gives itself can show itself except to the gifted and through it—not by constitution, anticipatory resoluteness, or exposure to the other, but by the will to see, *originally derived from givenness itself*." Marion, *Being Given*, 307, which is cited in an original translation in Thomas Carlson's illuminating chapter, "Blindness and the Decision to See: On Revelation and Reception in Jean-Luc Marion," in *Counter-Experiences: Reading Jean-Luc Marion*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), on Ibid., 165. Emphasis added. See also the articulation of this point in terms of the gift on Marion, *Being Given*, 112, and in terms of the call on Ibid., 270.

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to the Christian God (at least as a phenomenological possibility)—in short, if it is to offer a philosophy of Christianity. Such a theory of perception will need to advance beyond the planes of animality and organicity in order to account for and include those planes of perception that are distinctly human if it is to do justice to the fullness of the subject as a conscious incarnate person. Dufrenne's starting point of aesthetic experience enables him to do just that.

The second feature of Dufrenne's phenomenological framework that makes it worth further consideration by theological phenomenology is the integral conception of the human person's incarnate existence to which it gives rise, and which may be deployed in a correction of Henry's conception of the living being. Key here is Dufrenne's Merleau-Pontian affirmation of the "connaturality" between the subject and the sensuous alluded to above.⁴² Dufrenne himself argues in his 1981 text *L'Inventaire* that Henry's almost exclusive emphasis upon the subjective body and radical immanence in the *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body* "volatiz[es] the reality of the body-object. Absolute subjectivity is affirmed as corporeal, but it is not truly incarnate."⁴³ By insisting upon the human person's connaturality with the sensuous disclosed especially in aesthetic experience, Dufrenne establishes the objectivity of the body and thence is led to affirm the positive phenomenological significance of both the incarnate subject's empirical birth and the advent of conscious representation.⁴⁴ The resulting phenomenological anthropology is in this way free of the sort of acosmism and quasi-Gnosticism that one finds in Henry's framework *with respect to the body*, according to which the objective body is rendered non-essential to the truth of life.⁴⁵ This applies even to phenomenological life. In addition to being the temporal force that delivers the conscious subject to itself in a hetero-affective experience of "carnal auto-affection," life for Dufrenne is

⁴² Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire*, 307.

⁴³ Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire*, 245. Or as he writes on the following page, Henry's ontology "subordinates [subalternise], if not dissolves, the material body." Ibid., 246.

⁴⁴ Although not directed at Henry, the following passage from *The Notion of the A Priori* is relevant: "The eye, for example, is both a power of vision—or rather, vision itself—and an optical apparatus. These are not two different conceptions of the eye between which we are obliged to choose." Dufrenne, *The Notion of the A Priori*, 152.

⁴⁵ For but one articulation of Henry's acosmism, see: "The unity of the world is thus an immanent unity, and it is held in the Parousia of my flesh. The ultimate possibility of the experience of the world . . . requires a consciousness without world, an a-cosmic flesh." Henry, *Incarnation: A Philosophy of Flesh*, trans. Karl Hefty (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 145. Let us not commit the mistake of attributing Henry's quasi-Gnostic failure with respect to the body to his understanding of the living being's relation to concrete material reality or the cosmos broadly construed, nor to his conception of the divine Life itself.

also the dynamic force that opens the subject to the cosmos.⁴⁶ Life, he writes, again commenting on Henry's *Philosophy and Phenomenology of the Body*, is not simply "the flux of this internal [transcendental] experience," but also "the adventure of a living being exposed in the element of transcendence."⁴⁷ Put otherwise, life for the Dufrennian subject is not simply the autochthonous purling of a drive, but, as Frédéric Jacquet compellingly argues, unfolds as desire.⁴⁸ Critical here and elsewhere is Dufrenne's affirmation both of the phenomenological effectivity of representation and transcendence,⁴⁹ and of the immanence of presence to representation (living life to lived life, subjectivity to consciousness, the body itself to consciousness).⁵⁰ This is in marked contrast to Henry's hyper-subjectivist exclusion of representation and transcendence from the domain of phenomenological effectivity or life, and, it is worth noting, to Marion's hyper-objectivist subversion of representation due to his emphasis upon absolute givenness and saturated phenomenality.

Theological phenomenology may proceed from this framework and retrieve Dufrenne's thought in a consideration of the phenomenological significance of Christ on the basis of the Scriptural record both of experiences of his person and of his discourses about himself. Such is in large part Henry's approach in his philosophy of Christianity, which would serve as a model for the elaboration of a Dufrennian philosophy of Christianity. To begin, within a Dufrennian framework, Christ's revelation that the God in relation to whom incarnate subjects are children is Life leads to a conception of the divine Life in terms of trinitarian desire. Next, Dufrenne's framework would prohibit theological phenomenology from mistakenly claiming that Christ's objective body is practically non-essential to the phenomenological truth of the Christian event.⁵¹ Theological phenomenology would then be obliged to

⁴⁶ Dufrenne, *L'Œil et l'Oreille*, 64. See also Ibid., 53 and 57. Dufrenne's analysis of Georges Canguilhem's *La Connaissance de la Vie* is critical here: see Mikel Dufrenne, "Un livre récent sur la connaissance de la vie," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 58, no. 1/2 (January-June 1953): 170-87.

⁴⁷ Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire*, 245.

⁴⁸ See Jacquet, *Naître au Monde*, 92. More precisely, life for Dufrenne refers to its desire for presence, which theme cannot be expanded upon here.

⁴⁹ As he repeats variously throughout his texts, one must proceed "from presence to feeling via representation." Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire*, 293.

⁵⁰ On the immanence of presence to representation see, for example, Dufrenne, *L'Œil et l'Oreille*, 24. Dufrenne speaks in language similar to that of Henry when he writes that "representation is founded in [se fonde dans] presence." Dufrenne, *L'Inventaire*, 281. However, an analysis of Henry's framework shows that the latter is unable to maintain any positive relation between immanence and transcendence (i.e., representation) in any real sense due to the "eidetic incompatibility" or "absolute difference" between the domains of life and the world. Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 404 and 448, respectively.

⁵¹ One finds the shocking admission in *Words of Christ* that "[o]ur outside appearance is precisely only a semblance [apparence]." Michel Henry, *Words of Christ*, trans. Christina M. Gschwandtner (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 18. See Michel Henry, *Paroles du Christ*

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consider the potential phenomenological significance both of Christ's empirical birth in the sensuous world and of his subjective birth into consciousness as the Son of Man, with all that the latter would entail with respect to the progressive realization of his consciousness of self as the Son of God. By forcing theological phenomenology to take seriously Christ's assertion of his unique divine filiation (as the Son of God) alongside his status as a concrete incarnate subject (as the Son of Man), Dufrenne's framework would allow theological phenomenology to affirm the singularity of the person of Christ as *the* Son of God in relation to other incarnate subjects who are themselves children of God in a distinct sense.⁵² Dufrenne's integral view of the human person also invites theological phenomenology to consider the implications of the revelation of Christ (at least as a possibility) within Dufrenne's Schellingian phenomenological cosmology. The resulting cosmology would surpass that developed by Henry in *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, first, by reaffirming the objective revelatory potential of aesthetic experience given in sensuous presence; and second, by providing a framework, when theologically retrieved, capable of upholding the singularity of Christ's revelation as a distinct form of Life's self-revelation *alongside* other authentic avenues of re-birth in Life independent of specifically Christian revelation, such as that offered in aesthetic experience.⁵³ A Dufrennian philosophy of Christianity would thus avoid the dissolution of the

(Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002), 25. A similar gesture appears, this time articulated with respect to the person of Christ and with the support of Meister Eckhart, on Henry, *The Essence of Manifestation*, 428. Emmanuel Falque has already sufficiently addressed this point in his "Is there a Flesh without Body?: A Debate with Michel Henry," *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy – Revue de la Philosophie Française et de Langue Française* 24, no. 1(2016): 139–66.

⁵² At issue here is Henry's distinction between strong and weak self-affection, which he is at pains to maintain successfully, since his exclusion of transcendence from Life compels him to lean into the essential identity between Life and living beings. On this distinction, see Henry, *I am the Truth*, 106 f.

⁵³ For a presentation of Henry's phenomenological cosmology, see Christopher C. Rios, "The Unrealized Eschatology of Michel Henry: Theological Gestures from his Phenomenological Aesthetics," *Modern Theology* 36, no. 4 (2020): 843–64. Ultimately for Henry, life's self-revelation in aesthetic experience through the authentic painting is identical in content and form to that which, in the theological trilogy, will be described as Life's self-revelation in the flesh effected by the words of Christ recorded in the Gospels. More specifically, the very being of the material elements employed in the work of art is reduced to their subjective affective tonalities, that is, to life's self-revelation in the Henryan flesh. Thus Henry can write that "the sacred essence of life . . . is the content of all true art and explains the original connection everywhere between art and religion." Michel Henry, *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky*, trans. Scott Davidson (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), 127. Henry's statements with respect to Kandinsky on idem, *Material Phenomenology*, trans. Scott Davidson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 114, are telling here. See also Christina Gschwandtner, "The Truth of Christianity?: Michel Henry's *Words of Christ*," *The Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 13, no. 1 (June 2014), accessed on June 20, 2021, <https://jsr.shanti.virginia.edu/back-issues/vol-13-no-1-june-2014-phenomenology-and-scripture/the-truth-of-christianity-michel-henrys-words-of-christ/>.

distinctiveness and singularity of Christian revelation that haunts the theological articulation of Henry's hyper-subjectivism, as well as the suggestion that Christian revelation is discontinuous with other modes of divine revelation, such as one finds implicit in Marion's hyper-objectivism.⁵⁴

Conclusion

Dufrenne's non-theological philosophy is not incompatible with theological phenomenological questioning. His critique of Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot in "Pour une philosophie non théologique" serves to clear a path for philosophy and phenomenology so that they may return to the human person's concrete presence to the sensuous. Notwithstanding Dufrenne's misunderstanding of the Christian God, his framework may be retrieved on the basis of the accuracy of its descriptions of the human person's natural, cosmic existence. I have merely sketched a few of the implications that Dufrenne's philosophy of presence has for theological phenomenology as part of a larger project that aims to develop a new, Dufrennian philosophy of Christianity modeled on Henry's own. The success of this project, and indeed of any retrieval of Dufrenne's thought for theological phenomenology, ought to be judged not by whether or not it keeps within the bounds of orthodoxy. Even if it swerves into heterodox or even unorthodox domains, Dufrenne's framework may in that way reveal the limits of phenomenology for theology. Rather, such a project should be judged by the questions it answers and the pitfalls it avoids, the insights it may achieve or at least suggest, and by the questions it raises for both theology and phenomenology. At the very least, it cannot be said that Mikel Dufrenne's thought is irrelevant to theological phenomenology.

⁵⁴ The latter point cannot be pursued here. In Marion's framework, does not the logic of love revealed by Christ to constitute the trinitarian relations so defy "the almost arithmetic requirement that has brought us into the no doubt contestable habit of calling the two other religions (Judaism and Islam) 'monotheisms,'" precisely because it is paradoxical and therefore—like a saturated phenomenon—admits no common measure that would make it continuous with other modes of divine revelation? Jean-Luc Marion, *Givenness & Revelation*, trans. Stephen E. Lewis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 91.